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ABSTRACT

The dilemma for instructors of advanced second language conversation courses is how to create a situation in which learners feel confident and at ease but, at the same time, feel engaged and challenged. syllabus can be designed to accommodate learner needs and preferences by allowing students to generate their own overall course goals and individual lesson goals, incorporating contract grading, and having students decide the order in which chapters are studied. Individual units can also be structured to promote advanced learning and maintain student interest. Using the text as a basis for general organization, the teacher can enhance content with authentic materials such as newspapers, journal articles, and videotapes. Class size helps determine activity group size and quantity of instructor feedback. Toward the end of a chapter or unit, students or small groups can be asked to find and prepare materials for class presentation and discussion. In advanced courses, student ratings on standard proficiency guidelines may not rise rapidly, so evaluation of progress can be made more effective by contracting with students for specified improvements in performance. Evaluations should be frequent and non-threatening, approximately half formal and half informal. Further research and development of strategies for advanced conversation courses is needed. (MSE)

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ON ORGANIZING A LEARNER-CENTERED ADVANCED CONVERSATION COURSE

The advanced conversation course offers special challenges to instructors and learners alike. The course's primary goal is for learners to improve their oral proficiency in the target language. Yet the dilemma that we as instructors face is how to facilitate a learning situation whereby the learners feel confident and at ease, while they remain engaged and challenged. If the instructor relies solely on the textbook for course organization and content, the needs of the individual learner may be compromised.

The content of the study includes: a presentation of strategies for overall course organization which depend on learner input and feedback; a discussion of sequencing guidelines and engaging activities within the context of a unit; and finally an analysis of various means of evaluating learner competence as new languages skills are acquired. These means take into account research which has been done in students' learning styles, proficiency-based methods, and collaborative learning.

Let us begin by examining some ways in which the overall organization of the course can be made to fit the needs of the individual learner. In designing the syllabus the organization of the course can allow for students' needs and preferences to be integrated into the design of the course in the following ways: through students generating their own overall course goals, as well as through goals generated for individual lessons; through contract grading; and through having students vote on the order in which the chapters in the text will be studied.

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On the first day of class there can be class discussion about what some possible general course goals would be during the course of the term. This also allows for a discussion of how students are at different levels of oral proficiency. Since speaking in class is often the most stressful of learning situations as Dolly Jesusita Young (1990) notes, it is important to directly address these fears in class as they arise. This ideally begins during the first class session, with the discussion of individual course goals acting as a logical first step. These individual goals can also be reviewed and amended at midterm. In addition, as already noted, there can also be "mini goals" set by the student to correspond to each lesson.

Contract grading is another means by which the student can be in more control of the learning situation. One of the primary benefits of this system is that the student can no longer operate from the vantage point that the grade is **given** by the instructor. Students must then take more responsibility for the final grade that they earn. Generally students do not seem to want any input in helping them to determine their grades. Since the instructor establishes the general parameters for each category, there is no need to second guess the students' choices. The only verification necessary is to make sure that the final grade adds up to 100%.

As we are all aware, there is no textbook perfect for all occasions. This is doubly true for a conversation course. Research in teaching methods has shown over and over that real long-term learning takes place when the students are engaged in meaningful communication in the target language (Omaggio, 1986). The text should then act as a springboard for this communication. It should be used only as long as it fosters meaningful communication, and then should be put aside, and other related sources on the same general topic should be found. One preliminary and very simple way of making the text work for the students is to let the students

vote on the order in which the chapters will be studied. This vote also allows the instructor to know early on what the preferences of the class are. This is important since preferences can vary dramatically from one class to the next. This strategy also can diffuse the notion that instructors often hold that the class must "cover the book" during the term. Since the most popular chapters are studied first, the sense of urgency to get to the later chapters may be lessened.

Another strategy useful in understanding the preferences of foreign language students is to have them take a personality instrument (such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Keirsey Temperament Sorter). The relationship between personality type and learning style has only recently begun to be explored in foreign languages, most notably by Oxford and Ehrman (1988). I have conducted some very limited research using Myers-Briggs, and routinely administer the Keirsey Temperament Sorter to students whom I have not taught before. (They are however absolutely free to not fill out the questionnaire.) The results obtained by these instruments have afforded me a better understanding of the preferences of my students, which is helpful since there are certain types which are more drawn than others to enroll in a foreign language class. It has also allowed me to better understand, and perhaps more effectively solve, the problems that individual students have. It has also provided me with important insights into some of the limitations of proficiency-oriented instruction, since it has been my experience that certain types do have more trouble than others with exercises, assignments, and evaluations based on this method.

The second section of this study deals with some aspects on organizing individual units. One effective strategy in beginning a unit is to brainstorm with the students in order to find what

specific topics, related to the general subject of the unit, most concern or interest them. An alternative to this large group brainstorming session is to have small groups generate two topics which are arrived at by consensus.

The text can still remain the basis for the general organization of a unit. It can provide useful vocabulary, vocabulary exercises, readings, discussion questions, and other more proficiency-based activities. However, while the texts are often packed with activities, they sometimes come up short on actual content, thus relegating learning to short-term rather than to long-term memory.

Authentic materials such as newspaper and journal articles, and videos obviously help to supplement the content of any given chapter in the text. The materials that instructors have at their disposal may be limited, but they may still remain a rich source of supplementary activities in a number of ways. Following Omaggio's (1986) formula that theoretically any authentic document can be made to fit any level through the use of appropriate exercises, then even a video for a first semester class (if that is all that is available) could still be a valuable learning experience for advanced conversation students. The same can be said for more sophisticated and complex video clips, such as those from French television or cinema. The key is of course to provide an appropriate amount of introductory material to make the experience meaningful, and to require follow-up exercises which challenge, but do not overwhelm the learner.

The number of students in a class, as well as their general level, will also be a factor in determining what types of activities will be required of the student, whether they be large group activities, small group activities, independent activities, or special projects. When making use of more collaborative situations, such as small group activities, it is important to remember a

rule of thumb that Birckbichler (1982) and others (See Omaggio, 1986) have formulated: That there must be accountability for all the participants in the activity. Proof of accountability can come at the end of the exercise when there is, for example, a large group wrap-up following the small-group activity, or a report handed in by the appointed secretary of the small group, or even a quiz on the material covered during the activity. There can also be monitoring of students' errors if the instructor is free to listen in on the groups as they perform the task. Corrections can either be made immediately, or can be made in a more neutral way after the activity has been completed by writing the errors or the corrections on the board and having the class discuss them. If the conversation class is large it can be useful to hire teaching assistants, who are either highly qualified alumni of the class or native speakers, who can attend class on a regular or semi-regular basis to assist in small group activities. Thus there is the possibility of more monitoring of students' errors, and more assurance that students are doing the task properly.

Toward the end of a chapter or a unit, students should be in a position to actually provide the content for the day's activities. This can mean, for example, assigning the students work in the library, to find an appropriate article in the target language related to the chapter. The students would then report back to class. A variation on the theme of the traditional report given individually in front of the class is to have the reports done in small groups. For example, the presenter would first write any important new vocabulary on the board, with a definition when appropriate. He or she would then present a summary of the article to the other members of the group, who in turn would be responsible for writing out the three or four main points of the article. They would receive a daily grade for their work. The presenter would be evaluated

through, for example, a cassette recording made of the actual presentation or by handing in a written summary of the article. This situation requires the other students to be much more attentive and engaged than if they were only expected to sit and listen passively since they are responsible for reporting on what they hear. They are much more likely to engage in meaningful communication with the presenter in order to clarify certain points or to make doubly sure that they have understood the presentation.

The final section of this study deals with evaluating students' in the course. This process is another special challenge in an advanced conversation course. The use of ACTFL oral proficiency testing does not appear to offer us a simple solution. As oral proficiency testing shows, the more advanced the student, the slower the rate of progress up the proficiency cone. Bette Hirsch (1985) talks about the dilemma of using the ACTFL proficiency guidelines as the criterion for evaluating the student's progress for this very reason. Often at the end of one semester, there is no noticeable progress on the ACTFL scale. There is also the dilemma of whether to grade students on their real level or on the progress or effort that they have made during the course. One attempt at solving this problematical situation is to have progress built into the grading system. Where a certain percentage of the grade will automatically be based on improvement. For example, the students will be expected to have corrected certain identified nagging errors, or to have mastered certain grammatical points. This may mean that a general pre-test during the first week of class is necessary. The pre-test would be kept on file and compared to the student's performance at the end of the semester.

Evaluations should be frequent, yet as non-threatening as possible. One general guideline could be that half of any evaluation be from prepared material and the other half be spontaneous,

where the students will have to react in an appropriate way to certain situations, or where they will have to answer questions. A possible scenario for evaluation may be, for example, where the students are expected to role play with a partner. For instance Student A presents a prepared problem to Student B. Student B must react, respond, or solve the problem in an a logical and comprehensible manner. Later in the class, Student B will be able to present prepared material, and Student A will be in an ad lib situation. When the roles are reversed both Student A and B should be paired with other partners. These evaluations can be recorded on video or audio cassette and individual feedback can be given in written form to each student. The students can then correct their errors and return the corrections to the instructor who, in turn, verifies the accuracy of the corrections, and returns the re-corrected version once more.

A final note on the importance of frequent evaluations is that it is equally important for the students to be able to frequently evaluate the direction of class activities or to have input in what they feel the most effective or least effective activities are. These evaluations could be in class large group discussions, or they could be anonymous written evaluations. Obviously this empowers the students and gives equity to the evaluation process, but it also furnishes the instructor with valuable information on which to base future lessons. By frequently opening the doors of communication, the students are less likely to feel threatened, frustrated, or railroaded in the classroom. They should therefore be more open to engaging in classroom discussion and participate more freely in activities.

In conclusion, it should be evident that there needs to be much more research and dialogue on the organization and content of the advanced conversation course. This study offers only one general scenario of how the focus of this type of course can be shifted to account for

the needs and interests of the individual learner. The commitment that we as a community of foreign language instructors have made to oral proficiency for our students, requires us to revaluate what we have traditionally done in our advanced conversation classes. Since students in these classes are often our very best, we have an obligation to take their learning needs at least as seriously as those of our beginning and intermediate students. Although, paradoxically it appears that much more research has focused primarily on the beginning and intermediate foreign language classes. There is much more that we who teach these courses can and should share with our colleagues on this important subject.

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